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SANITARY INSPECTION OF TENEMENTS

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DEFINITION

THE sanitary inspection of tenements bears a rather interesting relationship to general sanitary inspection or public sanitation. Sanitary inspection in the general sense has to do with the environment, while the sanitary inspection of tenements has points of contact with both personal and public sanitation. It is the bridge between the two and it has, for this reason, various aspects which are common to both.

The sanitary inspection of tenements is a problem of maintenance as distinguished from the problem of construction. The inspection of construction work is simple as compared with that of securing proper maintenance of housing conditions. Under properly devised laws the inspection department knows at all times when buildings are to be started and it thus has opportunity to inspect while construction is under way and (again under proper laws) it has a final opportunity to inspect and issue an occupation permit before the house may be used. The number of pieces of work under actual construction, while often large, is always small as compared with the number of houses already built and needing inspection. The maintenance work is therefore far more difficult, complicated and important, and almost without exception it has received in this country far less attention than the inspection of houses under construction.

THE AIM OF SANITARY INSPECTION OF TENEMENTS

The aim of this sanitary inspection, as applied to tenements, is to guard against overcrowding, filth, bad ventilation, bad drainage and dampness. These conditions, as is well known, produce immorality in many of its phases. This is bluntly hinted at by Tennyson when he says:

“A single sordid attic holds the living and the dead,
And the smoldering fire of fever creeps along the rotten floor
To the crowded couch of incest in the warrens of the poor.”

These miserable conditions in tenements lead to empty tenements and full saloons, dance halls and cheap shows when the people are not at work and ought to be in their homes.

Another evil effect of bad housing is sickness, running through all the zymotic diseases, tuberculosis, nerve diseases, violence, insanity and many others. In regard to the zymotic diseases, Dr. Farr makes this interesting observation: “This class includes fever, small-pox, plague, influenza, cholera, and other diseases which have the peculiar character of suddenly attacking great numbers of people at intervals in unfavorable sanitary conditions. The diseases of this class distinguish one country from another, one year from another; they have formed epochs in chronology, and, as Niebuhr has shown, have influenced not only the fate of cities, such as Athens and Florence, but of empires; they decimate armies, disable fleets; they take the lives of criminals that justice has not condemned; they redouble the dangers of crowded hospitals; they infest the habitations of the poor, and strike the artisan in his strength down from comfort into helpless poverty; they carry away the infant from the mother's breast, and the old man at the end of life; but their direct eruptions are excessively fatal to men in the prime and vigor of age.”

These general observations surely indicate the need for sanitary inspection of tenements, but the need may be illustrated by concrete examples, a few of which I desire to take from Boston. We recently found in the North End in Boston an old Italian living in two very small rooms in the top of a two-story shack built in a back yard, the yard being not much larger than the shack itself. This structure was so dilapidated that the winds and the rains had free access to it. Notwithstanding the possibilities for ventilation, during the cold weather the windows were so covered with boards and plugged with rags that the place was close to suffocation and the conditions were practically indescribable. The floor showed no signs of the presence of a

broom, filthy clothing occupied all corners and practically all the furniture. The bed was piled high with filthy bedding, day clothing and, on top of all, a piece of meat, weighing perhaps 8 pounds, which was evidently bought at a bargain sale. It possessed all the colors of the rainbow and all the odors of decaying meat. In a bucket on the floor were chicken giblets and chicken entrails, also in an energetic state of decomposition. These are samples. At the time of one visit, the old man and his visitors (who always seem to be numerous) were sorting beans, and the discarded ones went to the floor where they were ground under foot and added to the general uncleanness.

Less than three weeks ago a case was found in the West End where a family of Jews had two very large and airy rooms and one small room in an old wooden building. The combination parlor and bedroom showed certain indications of self-respect, but the room used as a kitchen and dining room went as far in the other direction as it is possible to conceive. Here again filthy rags and clothing occupied all available space, actually mingling with the food on the table. The range, the table, the chairs were all covered with dirty plates and remnants of former meals. The offal from fish and animals remained where it fell on the table or on the floor and it showed signs of having rested so for a considerable period of time. The rather youngish young woman who seemed to be in charge manifested a certain amount of energy, because she had succeeded in developing a head gear which was perhaps a little ahead of the up to date, and her cheeks also showed a certain amount of exercise. She apparently did not expect anybody to see the place where she cooked and ate and she was very surly over the situation, both upon our visit and upon the visit of the health officers later.

On the congestion side, Boston can offer plenty of examples. The health department recently took into court a lone woman who, in three small rooms, kept 16 adult lodgers. Under our law she could not be taken into court for maintaining overcrowded conditions, but she was taken in for maintaining a lodging house without a license. In another case we found a family of father, mother and one child keeping 16 adult lodgers in four small rooms, two of them being attic rooms.

Even aristocratic Winchester offers samples of vicious overcrowding. A member of the board of health says that it is not uncommon for a family to take three small rooms, the middle one being used for general living purposes, cooking and eating, one used for the family sleeping purposes, regardless of age or sex, and the third room let, each corner to two men, and the middle to two if it is large enough to hold a fifth bed. Only recently this officer found a child, who had been reported absent from school, in bed in the same room with its father and mother and four brothers and sisters, four men in the middle room and six men in the third room, and the child had scarlet fever. So much for the need of sanitary inspection.

THE METHOD OF INSPECTION

When it comes to the method of inspection there is but little to be said, although to follow that little is all-important. The sanitary inspection of tenements should be regular and complete in the case of each individual house and apartment. The present method so commonly in vogue, that of inspection on complaint, is a mere farce. In only a small number of our cities are there individuals or organizations which take it upon themselves to report bad conditions, and even when they do attempt it their work must be sporadic, spotted and generally unsatisfactory.

Satisfactory inspection requires that there should be a sufficient number of capable inspectors to inspect every apartment in tenement houses at least once in every three months: once in two months would be better and once a month is often necessary in certain districts. This inspection, in order to be efficient, must have adequate expert supervision and it must be backed by a system of records that will make it possible to follow up carefully everything that is done. In addition to this, good legal support is a prime necessity, and the support of an aroused and effective public opinion is necessary. This may be easily observed because it is due to the absence of such a public opinion that we have our present vicious conditions in American cities and towns.

THE CHARACTER OF THE INSPECTOR

The character of the individual inspector is of the utmost importance. Knowledge, tact and energy, combined with universal good-will and confidence in humanity, are absolutely necessary. It may be worth while here to point out that the civil service, with all of its good qualities, is absolutely incapable of picking out, through any ordinary method of examination, a good sanitary inspector. You cannot by any examination paper weigh the qualities required.

WHAT INDIVIDUALS MIGHT DO

It is important to point out the work that individuals and organizations might do in this connection. In Belgium an act of 1889 brought into existence coöperating committees which keep a careful eye on the housing conditions in that country. These committees have, of course, an official character. They give aid in planning and selling dwellings and in finding suitable homes for the working people. The local committee in each instance investigates the sanitary conditions of dwellings and calls to the attention of the landlord any deficiency in the water supply or drainage and any other sanitary difficulty. If the landlord does not heed the notice, the authorities are brought into action and the landlord is compelled to do what is required. We have no coöperating committees of this kind in this country, so far as I know, but we have numerous local organizations which are doing much good work along this line and which can do still more. A prime difficulty is to find volunteers who can do good work. Social workers generally hardly know the difference between a lead pipe and a rubber tube. They have no conception of what is a legal and proper house and they too often seem not to care, although a bad home may be the cause of the very difficulty they are trying so prayerfully and so blindly to cure. It is of the utmost importance that the public know what the local authorities are doing in order that it may support an effective local authority, and stimulate the energy of one that is not effective. The best housing officials in Europe urge this support as an absolute necessity. This is a big and neglected item in the social program of American cities. A

volunteer association with a capable executive offers a quicker way out of our difficulties than anything else. Careful study, publicity and the drafting and enforcement of laws must be in great measure led by such private enterprise.

INSTRUCTIVE SANITARY INSPECTION

Another great need in this country is instructive sanitary inspection, private or public, preferably both. Public instructive inspectors would have the power of the law back of them and they could point the way much more effectively to an indifferent occupant or owner. Without doubt this type of work must be started through private enterprise. It is now being considered by the Woman's Municipal League in Boston, and they will doubtless get it under way during the coming year. The importance, the need and the possibilities of this work are pointed out beyond any question by Mrs. Von Wagner in the *Survey* for March 4, 1911. Such work, as far as it is of a private nature, should form a part of the program of such a private organization as I have mentioned. It is fundamental and imperative, particularly among our mixed populations.

HOUSE CENSUS

I think it should be said that preliminary to everything that has been suggested there should be a careful housing census with a detailed statement of conditions, ownership, occupancy, everything, in each individual instance. It seems more than inconsistent that in order to run our corrupt political machinery we take a careful census of individuals, but never deem it worth while to make a census of such important units as houses, any one of which may contain anywhere from two to two hundred human beings. Such a census would serve as an excellent foundation for any system of records. The changes for good or bad should in each case be noted in connection with the original report, and in this way a history of each house would be maintained from the time the original census was made. The condition of each house should be at all times known to the authorities, and then it would depend entirely upon the efficiency of the supervising authority whether or not the houses were kept in proper condition.